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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000018

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/10/2020
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI FM'S DAMASCUS VISIT SHOWCASES CLOSER
SARG-SAUDI TIES

REF: 09 DAMASCUS 723

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal met President Bashar al-Asad during a brief surprise visit to Damascus on January 5. Discussions focused on instability in Yemen, the prospects for Palestinian reconciliation, Iraqi elections, and the peace process. Arab diplomats and Syrian observers said the visit served as a follow-up to King Abdullah's first trip to Damascus as monarch on October 7, 2009 (reftel), and highlights closer ties between Syria and Saudi Arabia. Though one hopeful observer believed the visit underscores "the limits of the Syrian-Iranian relationship," with Syria lining up with Saudi Arabia and Egypt against the Houthi rebellion in Yemen, the Syrian parliament speaker's visit to Tehran the same day provided a note of counterpoint to that thesis. END SUMMARY.

SAUDI FM DROPS BY FOR SURPRISE VISIT

[1](#)2. (C) Arab diplomats, describing the visit as a "surprise," told us Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal focused on Yemen, Palestinian reconciliation, Iraq, and the peace process during his brief January 5 visit to Damascus. The Egyptian embassy reported it did not know about the visit in advance despite Prince Saud's departure from a meeting in Sharm al-Sheikh with President Mubarak earlier in the day. A Turkish diplomat noted the possibility of Prince Saud visiting Damascus was raised during the Turkish Foreign Minister's January 2 visit to Riyadh, but that the visit was not confirmed until shortly before the prince's arrival. FM Davotoglu reportedly encouraged the visit, underscoring what he termed as Turkey's attempts to "bring Syria and Saudi Arabia closer together" to strengthen regional stability.

[1](#)3. (C) The Egyptian ambassador met SARG FM Walid Muallem's Chief of Staff Bassam Sabbagh following Prince Saud's meeting with Asad. Sabbagh described the meeting as "warm and positive" and a continuation of the process of rapprochement that began with Asad's September 2009 visit to Saudi Arabia and King Abdullah's October 7 visit to Damascus.

YEMEN AND PALESTINIANS TOP AGENDA

[1](#)4. (C) Yemen was high on Prince Saud's agenda, according to Arab diplomats, who stated the prince sought reassurances the SARG opposes Houthi rebels fighting the Yemeni government and possible Iranian support for the rebellion. The Saudi FM reportedly received those assurances from his Syrian counterparts, and in his readout to the Egyptians Sabbagh stressed the SARG and Saudi Arabia held similar positions regarding Yemen. The Saudi visit came two days after Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khalid Mish'al visited Riyadh, and the Syrians echoed comments made by Mish'al supporting stability in Yemen and its territorial integrity. The SARG reportedly supported Mish'al's visit to Saudi Arabia, believing it would dispel the belief Hamas is supporting

instability in Yemen.

15. (C) An Egyptian diplomat said Prince Saud had also urged Asad to back Palestinian reconciliation efforts led by the Egyptians, and that Asad responded favorably. "We have to wait to see what happens, but this is positive if it promotes reconciliation and unity," she said.

FINDING COMMON GROUND ON IRAQI ELECTIONS?

16. (C) President Asad and Prince Saud made public statements following their meeting expressing hope that upcoming legislative elections would promote the chances for stability in Iraq. Some observers here read those statements to mean the Syrians and Saudis have agreed to support the same candidates, including former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. Arab diplomats opined the Saudis and Syrians were finding common ground on Iraq due to Saudi distrust of Iranian influence in Iraq and SARG dislike for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. "Absolutely the Syrians will try to influence the Iraqi elections, and they may be supporting the same candidates as the Saudis but for different reasons," Algerian DCM Fritah Amor said.

17. (C) President Asad and Prince Saud also discussed the peace process during the Saudi foreign minister's visit, and issued statements condemning "obstacles laid by Israel" following their meeting. Our contacts told us their SARG interlocutors were waiting to see if Special Envoy Mitchell would include Damascus on his next trip to the region before considering any new stances on the peace process.

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AND THEN THERE,S IRAN

18. (C) Arab diplomats said the Saudi prince's visit highlighted the closer ties Syria has pursued with the Saudis over the past several months, which culminated in King Abdullah's October visit to Damascus. The Algerian DCM said the visit also illustrated "the limits of the Syrian-Iranian relationship," and that the SARG was willing to break ranks with Iran on certain issues in order to bolster its relations with moderate Arab states like Saudi Arabia. "The Syrians recognize they have different interests from Iran on some issues. They have closer relations with Turkey and Saudi Arabia now and can express those differences with Iran more easily," he said.

19. (C) COMMENT: When King Abdullah visited Damascus in early October, SARG officials praised the visit as a critical step in normalizing relations between the two countries and promoting Arab unity. Prince Saud's January 5 visit reinforces the view here that SARG-Saudi relations are solidly on the path to "normalization." The prince's visit, coming on the heels of December visits by the Lebanese and Turkish Prime Ministers, highlights Syria's improved relations with several of its neighbors (even as its relations with Iraq suffer). The SARG's strong stance against the Houthi rebellion in Yemen does signal its willingness to break with Iran on issues deemed important to showcasing Arab unity. But while Syria may not need to rely solely on Iran to project power on regional issues, the Syrian People,s Assembly speaker,s praise, in a speech to Iran,s parliament on the same day as Saud al-Faisal,s visit here, for the "security balance" Iran provides the region provided a reminder that Damascus, relationship with Tehran remains strong. END COMMENT.

HUNTER